

WASHINGTON – Congressman Spencer Bachus (AL-6) today said a federally established program which provides death benefits to the families of firefighters and police officers who die in the line of duty is taking too long to process valid claims.

During a Capitol Hill news conference, Bachus cited the frustrating delays experienced by the family of Robert Lee Smith, a 30-year veteran of the West Shelby Fire Department who suffered a fatal heart attack fighting a brushfire on March 21, 2004.

Three years after submitting an application for death benefits, family members still have not received a determination.

"These families are not only having to deal with the death of a loved one, in many cases a husband and father who was the main breadwinner, but also a bureaucratic delay of years in receiving promised death benefits. This adds uncertainty and financial hardship to what is already a difficult and tragic situation," Bachus said.

Out of more than 250 requests for benefits made since 2003, awards have been made to just seven families according to the Department of Justice. In addition, 48 applications have been rejected and 198 cases have yet to be ruled on.

"There are about 800,000 volunteer fire fighters across our country. The least we can do to recognize those who have lost their lives protecting their community is to fairly and expeditiously respond to their families during a time of need," Bachus said.

Prior to passage of the Hometown Heroes Survivors Benefits Act, first responders who suffered fatal heart attacks and strokes directly related to duty were excluded from receiving death benefits under the existing Public Safety Officers Benefits Program.

The news conference calling on the Department of Justice to speed up its reviews and fully implement the law was organized by the International Association of Fire Chiefs and other

public safety groups.